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SELF EXAMINATION 118

EXPLAINED and RECOMMENDED.

In TWO DISCOURSES.

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EXAMINATION

THE

DISCOVERY



S E R M O N FIRST.

Self-examination explained and re-
commended.

By the Rev. Mr. CLARK.

PROV. iv. 26.

*Ponder the path of thy feet; and let all thy
ways be established.*

WHEN I consider that I am addressing
a number of rational and immortal
beings, whose eternal state depends upon the
right improvement of the present life, a charge
like this in the text may seem almost needless.
What! reasonable creatures, and not consider?
Is it possible they should not ponder the path
of their feet? Is it possible they should be
unconcerned about their happiness, or negli-
gent in the pursuit of it? Alas! how in-
credible soever this may seem, sad experience
will oblige us to acknowledge, that this is
in fact the case with the greater part of man-
kind. Though formed capable of reflection
and foresight, they live in this respect like the
VOL. IV. A brutes

brutes, who are void of understanding ; scarce ever considering the end of their being, or examining their conduct. They are engaged in a perpetual round of gaiety and folly, or immersed in the cares and business of life, and have not one hour to spare for serious thought and recollection. One vain pursuit succeeds another, till an habitual levity takes possession of the mind, and renders it altogether incapable of making any advances in wisdom and virtue. Thus they spend their days, without knowing the true enjoyment of life, and without answering the great ends of their being ; till at length death closes the scene, and calls them to a world, where (when it is too late) they will be convinced of their egregious folly, and wish, but wish in vain, their state of trial might be renewed.

Such are the fatal consequences of Inconsideration, that foe to honour and usefulness, parent of vice and misery, source of all that self-deceit, which blinds men's eyes, and leads them on to their own destruction.

The wise man, who had thoroughly studied human nature, knew but too well the dreadful and extensive effects of this principle ; and therefore uses his utmost endeavours to secure mankind from its influence. For this purpose, he calls upon them in the most earnest and affectionate manner to attend to the precepts of divine wisdom ; and describes in lively colours the character of the simple and inconsiderate, who runs heedlessly on, and exposes himself to every temptation. And to give the greater

weight to these representations, he elsewhere sets before us in a striking light, the piercing anguish and remorse which such persons will feel at the hour of death, from a reflection on their own foolish and thoughtless conduct.—In the passage before us, he particularly recommends that branch of consideration, which more immediately relates to our own temper and character, and is usually called Self-examination. The figure, under which this precept is expressed, is very frequent in the sacred writings, and is taken from a traveller, who carefully observes his steps and attends to the road, that he may avoid any danger to which he apprehends himself exposed. Thus in our journey through life, it behoves us to examine well the path in which we are walking; to consider whither it will lead us, and what advances we have made in it: or in other words, it is our wisdom to look into our own hearts, to enquire seriously and impartially into the state of religion in our minds; that we may form a true judgment of our real character in the sight of God, and may be the better able to regulate our future conduct.

As this advice is of so much importance to our religious interests, let me bespeak your attention, while I attempt,

- I. To explain the precept in the text.
- II. To shew the advantages that will arise from the observance of it.

And III. Give some directions to assist you in the practice of it.

I. I am to explain the precept in the text,
Ponder the path of thy feet.

Now this implies in the general, such a thorough examination of ourselves, and such a habit of close reflection upon our own conduct, as may secure us from any fatal miscarriages, and may assist our progress in religion. More particularly,

1. It includes a serious enquiry into our past conduct.

I mean not that every single action is to be recollected and examined. As this is impossible in itself, so neither is it necessary in order to answer the end proposed. It is the general tenor of our conduct by which we are to judge ourselves, since we are assured this will be the rule of future judgment. We are to consider then, whether this has been agreeable to our character as Men and as Christians; agreeable to the dictates of right reason, and the precepts of the gospel. Have we been prudent and circumspect, regular and conscientious in our behaviour; or have we blindly followed our own inclinations and the corrupt customs and manners of the world around us? Have we studied to adorn our holy profession, by a blameless and exemplary conversation, or have we not rather exposed it to disgrace?

We should reflect in what manner we have filled up the several relations in which we stand to God and our fellow-creatures. Have we been concerned to maintain that inward veneration for the divine perfections, that sense of our dependance on God, and that gratitude for his

his favours, that humble submission to the appointments of his providence, with that entire subjection to his authority and laws ; which may so justly be expected by the blessed God, as our creator, preserver, benefactor, and governor ? Have we endeavoured to cultivate sentiments of love, duty, and esteem, towards our blessed Redeemer, agreeable to the excellence of his character, and the importance of the benefits he has conferred upon us ? Have we set a just value on the blessings he has promised to his faithful disciples, and have we been solicitous to obtain an interest in them ? Has it been our prevailing concern to search out and obey his will as our great law-giver, and to follow his steps as our captain and leader ? And finally, have we preserved a due regard to his mediation and intercession in our religious services, being sensible of our own unworthiness, and that in his name alone we can draw near to God, with hopes of acceptance ? Again, in our intercourse with mankind, let us impartially consider what part we have acted. Have we upon all occasions strictly observed the laws of justice and honesty ? Are we chargeable with no secret fraud or allowed guile ? Have we in no instance taken advantage of the weakness or ignorance of others, to over-reach and deceive them ; but has the love we bear ourselves, been the standard by which we have regulated our conduct towards our brethren ? Have we at all times preserved that inviolable regard to truth and faithfulness, sincerity and uprightness, which becomes a

Christian? Have we abounded in the exercise of brotherly love and charity, cherishing a sincere affection for all our brethren, and cheerfully contributing every thing in our power to their assistance and relief? And lastly, have we conscientiously discharged the duties that belong to the particular relations in life in which we are placed? Let those especially who are at the head of families ask themselves, whether they have been careful to instruct and watch over those committed to their charge; and by their example and influence, to train them up in the ways of religion. And let us all examine, whether we have behaved with becoming prudence and fidelity, affection and tenderness, towards those with whom we are connected, and have been sincere in our endeavours to promote both their temporal and religious interests.

Let us farther enquire, how we have acquitted ourselves in the several parts of self-government: whether we have been steady and uniform in practising the duties of temperance and sobriety, purity and chastity, meekness and humility, resolution and fortitude: whether we have taken pains to watch over our hearts, to restrain those irregular desires and inclinations which have at any time arisen, and to encourage and strengthen every pious and virtuous affection: and finally, whether we have been diligent in our own business, careful to redeem our time, and faithful in improving the talents entrusted with us, for the service of God and our fellow-creatures.

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To all which should be added, a serious examination into the care with which we have improved the means of religion that have been put into our hands: whether we have been constant and sincere in the exercises of devotion both in public and private, and have made conscience of attending all the ordinances of divine appointment: and to conclude, whether it has been our earnest endeavour, by the study of the Scriptures, by meditation and prayer, to encrease in our acquaintance with divine truths, and to make greater attainments in every part of the Christian character.

Such are the enquiries which must qualify us for passing a right judgment upon ourselves; and which are comprehended under the general exhortation given in the text. But to render this examination effectual, it will be necessary to descend to such particulars under each head, as are suited to our own case; not resting in general enquiries, which may easily mislead and deceive us.

If upon taking this review of our conduct through life, we should see reason to hope that in the main it has been agreeable to our profession; yet, as we shall certainly recollect many instances in which we have deviated from the path of our duty, it becomes us to enquire, whether we have been truly humbled for our sins before God; whether we have confessed them with a deep repentance and sorrow of heart, and have had recourse to the pardoning mercy and grace of God through his Son. This is the only foundation, on which we can

reasonably build our hopes of the divine favour and acceptance, amidst the many sins and infirmities that attend us ; and without this merciful provision, the enquiry that has been recommended would only serve to throw us into despair. — But to proceed : the precept in the text may also imply,

2. A diligent Examination of the motives of our conduct, and the principal ends we have pursued in life.

It is from hence our actions take their colour ; and consequently an attention to these is absolutely necessary to Self-acquaintance. It is this perhaps that constitutes the chief difference between a truly religious person, and a man of the world : their outward behaviour may be, in many respects, nearly the same ; but the principles on which they act are widely different : while the one is governed by a sense of duty, and a regard to the divine authority, the other is swayed merely by views of temporal interest and a desire of recommending himself to his fellow-creatures. It must be owned indeed, that, amidst the great variety of motives by which we are actuated, it is often difficult, in particular instances, exactly to determine which has the preference. Thus perhaps we may be at a loss to know, whether those actions, which our partiality and self-love have inclined us to ascribe to a sincere regard for the honour of God and the good of mankind, did not really proceed from vain glory, and a concern for our own reputation in the eye of the world. But though this should
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render us more strict and impartial in our researches, that we may not be deceived by that self-flattery to which we are so prone to listen, it can by no means be admitted as an excuse for neglecting the enquiry. The more we accustom ourselves to attend to the secret springs of our conduct, the more easy and natural it will become. Besides, the examination here recommended, relates not so much to any one particular action, as to the great end we propose to ourselves, and the leading principle by which we are governed through life. And this one would imagine might without much difficulty be ascertained, by one who was sincerely desirous to know the truth, and had been used to make observations on his own character.

Let us enquire then, what kind of motives have had the chief share in determining our conduct; whether those which religion points out, or which are recommended by the example of the world around us. Let us particularly attend to the state of our mind; when we have been deliberating upon any important affair, and carefully observe what were the considerations that had the greatest weight with us: for though we are not to form our judgment from any single action, however important, yet a diligent attention to what passes in the mind on such occasions, will be of great use to assist us in discovering the general principles by which we are governed.

Now the great end which religion teaches us to keep in view, is that which, in the language

guage of Scripture, is called the *glory of God* ; * by a regard to which we are in general to understand such a prevailing sense of the divine authority, and such an unfeigned desire of the divine approbation, as shall lead us to honour him by a conformity to his will. This motive is of all others the most extensive, and where it has its due place in the mind, will prove the most effectual means of regulating the conduct. The most indifferent actions, when proceeding from such views, acquire a kind of sanctity ; and the value of every good work is greatly heightened and encreased. Let us reflect then, what influence this principle has had upon our minds. Have we above all things been concerned to approve ourselves in the sight of

* When the Glory of God, or any other general principle of the like nature, is recommended as the governing motive of our actions, it is by no means designed to exclude those motives that are of the social and benevolent kind from any share in determining our conduct. A regard to the welfare and happiness of our fellow creatures, is certainly a noble principle, and is really inseparable from a sincere desire of approving ourselves in the sight of God : nor can it be conceived, that a person who has a strong sense of duty and the divine authority, can be destitute of love to mankind. Nevertheless, as those motives that are drawn more immediately from religion, have a more extensive influence than any other, because they take in the whole compass of our duty, it seems most proper to represent these as the great ends we should propose to ourselves in life, and the measure by which we should regulate our conduct. And accordingly the Scriptures always teach us to consider ourselves, as the subjects of divine government, and direct us to look upon his will, as the rule of our actions. The several branches of virtue are enjoined upon us as the laws of our sovereign, whom it is both our duty and our interest to obey. And though another way of representing things might have been more soothing to human vanity, yet fact and experience prove, that this is most suited to the real state of human nature, and the circumstances in which we are placed.

God ?

God? Have the desire of his acceptance and favour, and the dread of his displeasure, had more weight with us than the opinion of the world, the gratifying our own inclinations, or the prospect of any temporal interest? If in any instance there has been a competition between these different motives, have we given the former the preference? Or on the contrary, have these great ends been seldom or never taken into the question; while our whole attention has been confined to the securing our worldly interest, or pursuing our sensual pleasures? Enquire yet farther, have we *set the Lord always before us*, and have we been as watchful over our conduct, when no eye but that of heaven has been witness to our actions, as when they have been exposed to public view? Have we made conscience of our thoughts, and the secret purposes of the mind, as well as our outward behaviour? In a word, have we lived as creatures who are accountable to their Lord and Master; and have we made his will, and not our own, the great rule of our life and actions? Thus let us search into our own hearts, that we may as far as possible discover the principle by which we are governed; and may from hence judge in some measure, to what class we belong, whether of those who *walk after the flesh*, and are *conformed to this world*, being under the influence of sensual worldly motives; or of those who *walk after the spirit*, and are *transformed in the renewing of their minds*, being actuated by higher views than those of sense.

Perhaps

Perhaps it may be thought by some, that to maintain such a constant regard to the Divine Being through the whole course of life, is too high an attainment for the generality of mankind ; and that, considering the variety of cares and concerns which necessarily engage their attention, it is not to be expected they should act upon such refined and exalted principles. To this I would answer, that it is not required of us, to have these motives at all times actually present to the mind, or that in every single action we should have an eye to, and intend the glory of God. But certainly none can say it is impossible, even amidst all the cares and pleasures of life, to preserve such an habitual regard to the divine presence, as may prove a guard upon the mind in an hour of temptation, and may support and animate us in the discharge of our duty. Thus, (to pursue the allusion in the text) a traveller has not his thoughts every moment fixed upon the end of his journey ; and yet this is that which really directs every step, and is the point to which he is continually tending.

Another branch of Self-examination, and which may assist us in making this enquiry into the ends and motives of our actions, is,

3. To consider attentively what our ruling-passion is, and what influence it has had in determining our conduct.

Every man has something peculiar in the make or constitution of his mind, which inclines him more strongly to some pursuits than to others, and which consequently lays him more open

open to temptations from that quarter, than from any other. In some, the love of pleasure, in others, the desire of gain, and a sordid attachment to their worldly interest has the ascendancy. Some minds that can look with contempt on sensual gratifications or the acquisition of wealth, are yet enslaved to pride and ambition ; they are struck with the charms of grandeur and power, and to this they can sacrifice their ease, their pleasures, and every other pursuit : or if their station in life should forbid any such expectations, yet the same temper will shew itself in fondness for praise and for being distinguished above those in the same rank. In others again, the love of ease and self-indulgence prevails over all other considerations ; which at the same time that it secures them from those irregularities into which others are hurried by their passions, renders them altogether useless to the world, and takes away the true enjoyment of life. Some tempers are more prone to anger and resentment, whilst others are of a milder and softer turn. Some persons are naturally inclined to acts of liberality and beneficence ; whilst others, even from the original constitution of their minds, are disposed to be saving and frugal, and are obliged to put a force upon themselves, when from a sense of duty they perform any acts of charity.

Now amidst this variety of tempers, wherever any one of them prevails, it will have a great effect upon the whole of a man's conduct, and will give a colour to all his actions. Those duties that more immediately oppose
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this reigning disposition will seem peculiarly difficult, and will cost him many painful struggles ; while those that fall in with, or however do not contradict it, will require little or no self-denial.

It is evident therefore, that in order to know our true character, it is necessary to be acquainted with this part of our constitution, and seriously to examine what share it has had in determining our conduct. Perhaps, upon such a survey, we shall often find that pride, or covetousness, the love of pleasure, or whatever else is our reigning passion, had much more weight with us in many of our resolutions, than those noble motives that have been suggested. It is no wonder indeed, if this should in some instances have gained the ascendancy. An enemy, that is continually renewing his attacks, will, it is probable, find some unguarded moment, in which he may succeed. But the grand question is, what has been our general conduct in this respect. Has it been our habitual concern to guard against the influence of this unhappy bias in our temper? Have we treated it as our enemy, and sincerely endeavoured by the exercise of resolution and self-denial, and by earnest prayer, to weaken and overcome it? Have we carefully avoided whatever might tend to irritate and encrease the evil ; and if in any instance it has gained an advantage over us, has it been the matter of our grief and lamentation before God, and have we been so much the more watchful and circumspect? If we are conscious of hav-

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ing acted this part, a good foundation will be laid for inward satisfaction and confidence. But if, on the contrary, we have suffered these dangerous principles to gather strength by indulgence; if we have without concern seen them enter into all our determinations, and prevail even against the dictates of religion and conscience, we have great reason to fear that our hearts have not been right with God.

Another particular comprehended under the precept of the wise-man is,

4. A diligent enquiry into the present temper and state of our minds.

By which I mean, not that particular frame or disposition, which may chance to prevail at the time when the enquiry is made; and which being variable and uncertain, and depending upon many accidental circumstances, can afford no sufficient rule by which to judge of our real character; but that which is become the settled purpose and resolution of the mind, the prevailing bent of the will and affections. Whatever has been our temper or behaviour in time past, what is it now? If we have heretofore *followed divers lusts and vanities*, are we now convinced of the folly of such pursuits; and are we come to a full determination of giving up ourselves sincerely and without reserve to the service of God? Is it the language of our hearts, *O Lord our God, though other lords have had dominion over us, henceforth by thee only will we make mention of thy name?* If. xxvi. 13.

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Let us examine in what light sin appears to us. Once perhaps we were ready to esteem it a light matter, and were but little sensible of its malignity, or apprehensive of its consequences: Are we now convinced of its baseness and deformity as well as its fatal effects? Is there a settled hatred of it rooted in our breast, and an habitual purpose not to indulge it? Do we carefully guard against those temptations to which we are most exposed, and do we feel a holy fear of being seduced and ensnared through the deceitfulness of sin? Is our conscience awake and sensible? Is it easily alarmed at the apprehension of danger? Does it reproach us for the least deviation from our duty; and does it faithfully set before us the terrors of the Lord, in order to make us more watchful and circumspect?

Consider farther, what are our sentiments of the law of God? Do we not only approve of it as holy, just and true, in our judgment and understanding, but do we feel an inward practical conviction of its excellence? Do we assent to all its precepts, even those that are most contrary to our inclination or interest, and is it our fixed resolution to make them the rule of our life and actions? Do we *hunger and thirst after righteousness*, and is it our earnest desire to be more entirely conformed to the divine will? Can we lay our hand upon our hearts and say, that we would not upon any consideration knowingly and willfully transgress any one of the divine commands: that we are ready to deny ourselves every gratification that shall appear inconsistent with

with our duty, and to give up every temporal advantage that may have proved a snare to us? In a word, is it our deliberate purpose to sacrifice every thing for the sake of a good conscience, and to make religion and the securing our immortal interest, our first and great concern? Perhaps we may secretly intend only a partial obedience, and may hope that by parting with some sins, we may be allowed the more freely to indulge ourselves in others. But let us beware that we are not thus deceived; for it is certain, even from the very nature of religion, as well as from the express declarations of Scripture, that nothing less than sincere and universal obedience will be accepted. *For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, (i. e. allowedly and deliberately) he is guilty of all;* (James ii. 10.) as it plainly appears that he is not influenced by a sense of the divine authority, even in those instances in which he observes the law, since the same obligation equally extends to the whole.

Again, let us inquire, how we stand affected towards the great objects of faith. Do we feel a deep sense of their importance? Are we concerned to maintain a prevailing regard to things invisible and eternal, or does this world and its affairs take up all our time and thoughts? Do we consider ourselves as pilgrims and strangers here, who must soon remove hence; and are we chiefly solicitous while we continue here to prepare for that everlasting state on which we are entering? Once more, let us examine

what notions we have formed of happiness. Do we esteem the pleasures and enjoyments of the present life as our chief good, or the favour of God, the peace of our own consciences, and the prospect of eternal blessedness? Which of these is the great object of our hopes and wishes? Can we say, in the sublime language of the prophet, *Though the fig-tree should not blossom, and there should be no fruit in the vine, though the labour of the olive should fail, and the fields yie'd no meat; though the flock should be cut off from the fold, and there should be no herd in the stall; yet will I rejoice in the Lord, and joy in the God of my salvation.* Habbak. iii. 17, 18. If this is in any degree our prevailing temper, we have reason to hope that we are possessed of that *spiritual mind which is life and peace*: But if all our wishes and desires centre here, if the pleasures and pursuits of this life constitute all the happiness we aim at, there is too much room to fear that we have that *car-nal mind, which is enmity against God*, and which must disqualify us for being admitted to his presence.

5. The Examination recommended in the text, must be accompanied with a sincere resolution and a correspondent endeavour by divine assistance, to reform the errors of our past life, and to make continual advances in virtue and goodness.

This is the great end for which this self-enquiry is designed; and unless this end be answered, all our pains and labour will be lost. Indeed one would imagine it could scarce fail
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of producing this happy effect, if it were performed with closeness and impartiality. For whoever will allow himself to reflect seriously, on any instance of misconduct with which he has been chargeable, must condemn himself, and wish to correct it for the future. And this conviction, if it be founded on right principles, will engage him to humble himself before God, to implore his pardoning mercy according to the terms of the gospel, and to entreat those supplies of his grace, by which he may be assisted in his struggles with sin, and purified from every defilement. And when he has once proceeded thus far, a happy foundation is laid for a sincere amendment.

In this manner then should we improve that enquiry into our own character which has been described; carefully attending to those instances in which we have gone astray, marking the occasions of our error, and maintaining a holy caution and jealousy over ourselves, that we be not again drawn away and ensnared. Especially should we guard against those sins by which we are most easily beset, and to which from our natural temper and constitution we perceive ourselves most strongly inclined. We must labour, by the exercise of continual watchfulness and self-denial, joined with earnest prayer, to suppress every sinful desire, to restrain every inordinate affection, and to correct all those evil habits which we may have formed. We should carefully observe wherein we have been defective in the discharge of our duty, and set ourselves to perform it with greater di-

ligence and resolution. If in any respects we have been barren and unprofitable, we should consider how we may become more useful in the world, how we may fill up our respective stations in life with greater advantage; and should be concerned more faithfully and zealously to improve whatever talents are entrusted with us. If we perceive the principle of divine love too weak and languid, and incapable of resisting the force of appetite and passion, we should endeavour to strengthen it by a more frequent contemplation of the divine perfections, and especially the displays of his goodness and love. And thus, if, upon a like survey, we find that we are too much under the influence of a narrow selfish temper, we should take every method to cherish a more sincere and disinterested affection for our brethren; we should accustom ourselves to enter into their concerns, to interest ourselves in their welfare, to sympathize with them under their distresses, and to perform every kind and benevolent office for them in our power. Thus should it be our sincere endeavour, in dependance on those divine aids which we are taught to expect, not only to subdue and mortify all the irregular passions and propensities of our nature, but to cultivate every pious and virtuous affection, and to make continual advances towards that perfection of character, to which it was the design of the Christian religion to raise us.

Having thus explained the precept in the text, let us now,

II. Consider the advantage that will attend the practice of it. This

This is expressed in the latter clause of the text, *Let all thy ways be established*, or as it might be rendered, *that all thy ways may be established*.

Which (as we have already observed) alludes to the safety and pleasure with which a person travels, when he pays a proper attention to his steps, and conveys a lively idea, ~~that it implies~~ *of* that steadiness and uniformity of conduct, which is the result of habitual consideration and reflection. — *It implies*

1. That this will be a probable means of securing us from all fatal errors and miscarriages; or of restoring us to the path of duty, if we have wandered from it.

Consideration is the first step to amendment. *I thought on my ways*, (says the Psalmist) *and turned my feet unto thy testimonies*, Psal. cxix, 59. When the sinner looks within, and contemplates the state of his mind and the situation to which he is reduced: when he reflects on the hateful nature of sin, the injury that is thereby offered to the divine authority, and the base ingratitude he has been guilty of against his best friend and unwearied benefactor: when he attentively considers the vanity of those sinful pleasures, to which he has sacrificed his hopes of heaven; and surveys the dreadful prospect that lies before him; he can hardly avoid feeling a deep sense of shame and remorse, and will be anxious to know how he may escape the danger to which he is exposed, and obtain forgiveness and reconciliation from God. To confirm the justice of this remark, we may observe, that those who indulge

themselves in the pursuit of unlawful pleasures cannot bear reflection. They are never so miserable as when alone ; and fly to company as a shelter from themselves, and the upbraidings of their own minds. Whereas if they were wise enough calmly to attend to the remonstrances of conscience, they might be restored from the error of their way, and led into the paths of righteousness and peace.

On the other hand, frequent Self-examination would preserve us from those irregularities of temper and conduct, into which the thoughtless and inconsiderate are easily betrayed ; and amidst all the storms of life, would effectually secure us from making shipwreck of faith and a good conscience. Being thoroughly acquainted with our own strength, (which will be the consequence of following the advice that has been given) we shall learn not rashly to expose ourselves to danger ; and being continually on our guard, we shall not be easily surprised by temptation. If we are at any time attacked by the enemy, that habit of reflection we have formed will make it natural for us to call to mind those great motives of religion, which may assist us in standing our ground ; and while we are faithfully exerting our own endeavours, we are encouraged to hope for those influences from above, which will give us a compleat victory, and cause the tempter to flee from us.

A careful attention to our own conduct would likewise tend to secure us from the instances of imprudence and indiscretion, into which even good men have often fallen, and by which they have brought disgrace upon their profession.

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The man of reflection will look well to his goings; will be solicitous to act on every occasion, whether of greater or lesser importance, agreeably to his station and character; and while his *first* care is to keep a good conscience towards God, his *next* concern will be to provide things decent and honourable in the sight of all men.

2. We may add to this, that such a habit of reflection will confirm and strengthen the mind, and enable us to make continual advances in holiness.

As it will teach us to watch against every rising passion, and to guard against the least appearance of evil; so it will establish our good resolutions, and secure us from that fickleness of conduct, which betrays a weak mind and is so prejudicial to our religious interests. Our *righteousness* will not then be like the morning cloud and the early dew, which soon pass away, (Hos. vi. 4.) and disappoint the hopes which they had raised: but will resemble the *shining light*, which shineth more and more unto the perfect day, Prov. iv. 18. When a person has deliberately weighed the motives of his actions, and formed his determination upon a careful survey of the consequences of things, it is not likely that he will be easily moved from his purpose. He will by degrees form a habit of resolution and steadiness in the adhering to the dictates of reason and conscience, which no temptation will be able to break through. He will learn to practise self-denial, and to *endure hardship, as becomes a good soldier of Jesus Christ*; and will be rendered exemplary

in every part of the Christian character. As he is frequently reviewing the several branches of his duty, and comparing his own temper and conduct with them; as he is solicitous to reform whatever he finds amiss, and to excell in every thing that is truly valuable and praiseworthy; it may reasonably be expected, that under the influences of the Spirit of God, he will make considerable advances in the divine life; while by his wisdom and moderation, joined with his zeal and activity in the service of God, he reflects a distinguished lustre upon his sacred profession. Yet amidst his superior attainments, that self-knowledge which he has acquired will keep him *humble*. The more thoroughly he is acquainted with his own heart, the more sensible will he be of his own imperfections, and consequently the less reason will he find for pride and self-sufficiency. That "pride was not made for man," is written on every part of our frame, and he that is yet to learn this lesson is a stranger to himself.—And to conclude, as the natural effect of this progress in religion, the mind will enjoy true peace and solid satisfaction; being unruffled by the storms of passion, and secure from the stings of conscience, it possesses that sacred heart-felt joy, which the world cannot give, that *peace of God, which passeth all understanding*.

S E R M O N II.

Self-examination explained and recommended.

SECOND PART.

By the Rev. Mr. CLARK.

PROV. iv. 26.

Ponder the path of thy feet; and let all thy ways be established.

THUS saith the Lord of hosts, Consider your ways, Hag. i. 5, 7. This admonition was given by the prophet Haggai, in the name of God, to the Jews, after their return from the Babylonish captivity, in order to stir them up to greater diligence and zeal in rebuilding the temple; which it appears they had greatly neglected, whilst their whole attention was confined to their own private concerns, and they seemed only solicitous to live at ease and enjoy themselves. To shew the great importance of the admonition, it is repeated a verse or two after, and introduced with

with the same solemnity. It is a pleasure to find that it was not without its desired effect : for the history informs us, that *Zerubbabel and the remnant of the people obeyed the voice of the Lord their God, and the people did fear before the Lord*, Hag. i. 12. And is not the same general charge equally applicable to each of us? Which of us, Christians, does not need to be called upon to the exercise of greater watchfulness and circumspection in our conduct? Are we conscious to no inward disorders, no irregularities of temper, or imperfections in our character which should render Self-examination and serious reflection needful? And though the exhortation be not indeed addressed immediately to us, as it was to the Jews, *in the name of God*, yet since both reason and religion point it out as our duty, we must be convinced that we are bound to pay the same regard to it.

In a former discourse on this subject, we have considered the nature of that self-enquiry, which is recommended in the text; and have described it as consisting in a careful review of our past conduct; a particular examination of the principles or motives, on which we have acted through life; together with an enquiry into our leading or ruling passion, and the influence it has had in determining our conduct; to which we added, a diligent observation of the present temper and state of the mind; and a sincere resolution and endeavour to rectify what has been amiss, and to make greater advances in religion. We then proceeded to illustrate

illustrate the argument by which the precept is here enforced, *thy ways shall be established*: and observed in the first place, that it will be a means of securing us from any fatal errors and miscarriages; or of restoring us to the right path, if we have wandered from it. And secondly, that it will greatly tend to strengthen and establish the mind, and consequently promote our improvement in the Christian temper and character.—I am now,

III. To give some directions that may assist us in the performance of what has been recommended.

I. Set yourself as in the presence of God.

Retire from the world, and exclude the affairs of it as much as possible from your mind. It is true, they will often return to embarrass or dissipate the thoughts; but if resolutely and constantly opposed, the difficulty will certainly lessen. Every one is sensible of the effect which the presence of a wise and good man whom we esteem, has upon the mind, to restrain the roivings of the imagination, and to fix the attention. How much greater influence should the consideration of that all-perfect being have upon us, who is intimately acquainted with the secrets of our hearts! Shall we not dread to think of appearing with irreverence before our maker and our judge? Let us endeavour then to compose our minds, to collect our thoughts, and consider his eye as immediately upon us, and observing how we conduct ourselves in this important inquiry. If we are sincere and faithful in these researches,

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he will behold us with complacency, and will be ready to impart divine influences from above, to render our endeavours successful. Let us consider our Redeemer likewise, as looking down upon us from the height of his glory, and tenderly concerned for our welfare. He is represented as *walking in the midst of the golden candlesticks: his eyes are as flames of fire*, which penetrate the inmost recesses of the soul; and we are assured that he employs that extensive power with which he is invested, to promote the purity and perfection of his church, that he may present it at last without spot or wrinkle to his Father, with exceeding great joy. Let us study to approve ourselves in his sight, that he may see in us of the travail of his soul. And while so august a presence as that of God himself, and of his Son, fills us with sacred awe, let it at the same time animate us to the more diligent and chearful discharge of this duty, since we are encouraged to expect all necessary assistance, and assured that our labour shall be crowned with a rich and everlasting reward. Which leads me to the next direction I would lay down for making this enquiry, which is,

2. To implore the divine direction and assistance.

From the view that has been taken of the subject, we must be convinced that to form an acquaintance with ourselves is no easy task. It is an employment to which we are naturally averse. The mind having been so long accustomed to converse with outward objects, finds

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it difficult to turn inwards and converse with itself. It requires great resolution to enter so thoroughly and to examine so impartially into our character, as is necessary to form a true judgment. If then we are duly sensible of the weakness and ignorance of our minds, and our liableness to be misled in our enquiries, it will be natural for us to look up to the Father of lights, whom we believe present with us, for that wisdom which we find not in ourselves. **That** such assistance will not be refused, if we ask it in sincerity, we have the strongest assurance from the promise of our Saviour himself. Luke xi. 9, 10. *I say unto you, Ask, and it shall be given you : seek, and ye shall find : knock, and it shall be opened unto you. For every one that asketh receiveth ; and he that seeketh findeth ; and to him that knocketh, it shall be opened.* And to give the greater encouragement to our prayers he adds, ver. 13. *If ye being evil, and consequently your affection imperfect, do yet know how to give good gifts unto your children ; how much more shall your heavenly Father give the holy Spirit to them that ask it.* The apostle James's advice is of the same kind, *If any man lack wisdom, let him ask it of God, who giveth liberally to all and upbraideth none ; and it shall be given him,* Jam. i. 5. Let all our enquiries then into our character, be introduced with an humble fervent address to the Father of spirits, that he would vouchsafe to enlighten our dark minds, and lead us into an acquaintance with ourselves. Let us entreat him to purge our souls from the mists of error, passion, and prejudice,

judice, that we may not be led astray by partiality and self-love, but may pass a right judgment upon our character and state. *God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things.* He is yet more perfectly acquainted with what passeth within us, than we ourselves, and cannot be deceived, as we may be, by false appearances. What reason then is there that we should offer up the petition of the Psalmist; *Search me, O Lord, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: See if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.* Psal. cxxxix. 23, 24.

Let me farther add as a necessary caution in this enquiry,

3. Be upon your guard against the deceitfulness of your own hearts, while you are conversing with them.

As no fraud is more fatal, so none is more common, than that by which men impose upon themselves. They are always willing to hope the best. However severe they may be upon others, they easily overlook or excuse their own failings, and see every part of their conduct in the most favourable light. Hence they will be apt too hastily to conclude, that all is well with them, and that they are in a state of favour and acceptance with God; whilst in reality they are strangers to the life and power of religion, and are yet in their sins. Agreeably to the observation of Solomon, *There is a way that seemeth right unto a man: but the end thereof are the ways of death,* Prov. xiv. 12. To prevent so fatal a deception, we must be strict and particular in

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our enquiries. *He that trusteth his own heart is a fool*, Prov. xxviii. 26. The human heart is like a labyrinth, which has endless mazes and windings, in which the unskilful and careless are in danger of being lost and bewildered. When a person sets himself to examine into his own conduct, passion and self-love immediately start up, and often mislead him in the search. By their enchantments they disguise his actions, paint them in false colours, and thus pervert his judgment. Under the influence of this wrong bias, he is tempted to *call evil good, and good evil*: and those very things which he would highly condemn in another, he either passes over unnoticed, or excuses in himself. Again, we are too ready to judge of our true character from the temper of the mind; or the state of the spirits, when we make the enquiry. If we are chearful and lively, if our views of things are bright and striking, we draw a favourable conclusion: but if the scene is changed, if our spirits are on any account dejected, and our minds beclouded with melancholy, we are then disposed to fear the worst, and *to write bitter things* against ourselves: whereas in reality our general state and character is not at all affected by these changes in our animal constitution, which as they are not in our own power, will never be charged to our account. And to add no more, (for it would be endless to enumerate all the ways in which men deceive themselves) many look abroad into the world to learn their character, instead of consulting their own hearts.

hearts. If they live in good reputation with their neighbours, and especially if they have reason to believe that they stand high in the esteem of wise and good men, they are satisfied, and too easily conclude that all must be right within; without considering, that the world is a stranger to what passes within their own bosoms, and that the secret testimony of a man's own conscience, that faithful monitor, is of infinitely greater importance than the opinion of all the world beside.

Since then we are so liable to be deceived, we can hardly be too strict and scrupulous in our researches. We must not hearken to the dictates of self-love, or to the flatteries of the world; but must sit in judgment upon ourselves, and suffer conscience to bring in an impartial verdict. Alas! what will it avail to speak peace to ourselves, if the great searcher of hearts do not confirm the sentence? Such false hopes will certainly end in the most bitter disappointment and overwhelming despair.

Yet, on the contrary, it is possible we may pass too severe a censure upon ourselves: and there is no doubt, but many serious upright Christians have distressed their minds with needless fears, and have denied themselves that hope and comfort to which they were justly entitled. In some, this arises from a natural *weakness* and *timidity* of temper, which always inclines them to fear the worst; in others, from a *gloomy melancholy* disposition, which represents every thing in the most unfavourable light: whilst in many
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cases it proceeds from some mistaken notions of the true nature of religion, and the qualifications necessary to our acceptance with God. This, however, is an error much less to be dreaded than the former, and into which the generality of persons are less likely to fall. It is much safer in an affair of so great consequence to be too fearful, than too presumptuous. Let us pray to him who made the heart, and *by whom all our actions are weighed*, that he would secure us from every mistake by which either our safety or our comfort might be endangered, and enable us to *judge righteous judgment*.

4. Fear not to know the worst of your case. Many persons act in their religious concerns like those tradesmen, who, because they are sensible their affairs are in a bad state, neglect to examine their accounts. They cannot bear to look the danger in the face, and are willing to put the thoughts of it as far from them as possible. Thus they go on from day to day, till ruin seizes on themselves and their families. Whereas, if they had carefully enquired into their circumstances, when they first suspected them upon the decline, and taken those measures which prudence would have suggested, they might have retrieved their affairs and saved their credit. And thus in the present case, men consult their own consciences, but are afraid to receive their answer; like Pilate, when he asked *what was truth*, but would not wait for a reply. But remember, though you now stifle the voice of conscience, the time is coming, when you will be able to evade it no

longer; ere long it will speak as with the voice of thunder, and will fill you with inexpressible anguish and horror. Be entreated then to hearken to its most faithful and severe reproofs, while you may escape that ruin which hangs over your head. Now it speaks to you as a *friend*, and its admonitions, however unpleasing, may be attended with the happiest effects; but the hour is hastening, when its remonstrances will be the keen reproaches of an *enemy*, that will only serve to aggravate our misery, and render our state more deplorable. — Be wise in time. What though it give you pain to search into your hearts, and to examine those evils to the bottom, which are lodged there? Is it not like the pain that is felt from the searching of a wound by the hand of a skilful and faithful surgeon, which in some cases may be necessary even to save the patient?

5. Pursue the enquiry, till you have brought it to some conclusion, and faithfully observe and comply with the admonitions which conscience may give you.

Be not satisfied with a general superficial review of your conduct, which can make but a very transient impression upon the mind, and produce but little effect. But enter closely and deeply into your own hearts, and endeavour as far as possible to learn your true character; at least so far as to know what your duty is, and what measures you are to pursue. For whatever be the result of your enquiry, *action* is necessary. If you find reason to apprehend, that you are as yet *destitute* of a true principle of

of religion, if you have hitherto been unconcerned about your eternal interest, if you have allowed yourself in the practice of any known sin, or the neglect of any acknowledged duty; dread to think of continuing in so dangerous a state: be perswaded to flee from the wrath to come, and lay hold on eternal life. Comply with the gracious terms of the gospel, and by faith and repentance turn unto God, and make your peace with him through the mediation of his Son. If on the other hand, you have good ground to form a *favourable* conclusion, be thankful to God, who by the various methods of his providence and grace, has brought you into this happy state. But think not your work is done. Still be pressing forwards and making greater advances in the Christian life. Consider how you may most acceptably express your gratitude to God and to your Saviour, in what instances you can exert yourself for their service, and in what respects you may be more useful in the station which providence hath assigned you. Reflect wherein you have failed; (for the best have failings) and apply yourself with redoubled ardor to correct your past errors, and to supply what is wanting in your character. But if, after strict enquiry, you remain still *in doubt* to which class you belong, you cannot surely rest satisfied in such a state of uncertainty. Is it then a matter of indifference with you, whether you are the servant of God or of Satan, an heir of heaven or hell? Or would you put off the determination to some future time? For

what end ! Will it be easier, think ye, to restrain the irregular workings of appetite and passion, and to submit to the rules of reason and religion after a long course of sinful indulgence ? On the contrary, will not vicious habits gather strength by delay ? Will not your state become every day more hazardous ? Will God be more ready to hear and assist you, when you have put off your application to him, till you have lost your relish for sensual pleasures, and have nothing but the dregs of life to offer him ! Rather may he not be justly provoked by your dissingenuity and ingratitude to withhold those gracious influences which you had so long slighted, and to give you up to the sad consequences of a hardened heart and a reprobate mind ?

But if you are really desirous to arrive at fuller satisfaction in this important affair, be more watchful and diligent ; labour after greater measures of knowledge and holiness, and carefully improve for this purpose all the means of grace, with which you are favoured. Especially be frequent and earnest in your applications for divine assistance. Maintain a constant and humble intercourse with your heavenly Father through the blessed Redeemer, that you may derive from him continual supplies of wisdom and grace. By pursuing this course, the Christian may by degrees attain to a well-grounded hope of his interest in the divine favour and the safety of his state. But till he has made some considerable progress in religion, he can have but very little evidence

even of his sincerity; and will probably continue in the same uncertain doubtful state to the end of his days. I shall only add,

6. Frequently renew the exercise of Self-examination according to the directions laid down.

We are not to expect that the performance of this duty *in a single instance or two*, will be attended with those happy effects that have been mentioned. It must be *often* repeated, and in some measure be made *habitual*: that is, we must endeavour to form a habit of reflection, which may extend its influence through our whole conduct, that we may not be surprised into sin, but may be steadily governed by the principles of reason and religion. And for this purpose, it will be necessary to call ourselves frequently to an account, and to take every opportunity of examining into the true state of our religious character. So difficult a work as that of knowing ourselves cannot be soon dispatched. We shall not be able, till after repeated trials, to discover the latent springs of action, to detect those frauds by which we often impose upon ourselves, and to view our actions in their true light. Instead of being the work of an *hour*, as some seem to think, it is really the business of *life*: and after all the pains that can be taken, and all the time that can be spent in this enquiry, our self-acquaintance will at last be very imperfect. But this ought not to discourage us from making the attempt; since, if we are sincere in exerting our own endeavours, we may hope, with the divine assistance, to acquire such a

degree of self-knowledge, as will be sufficient to direct our conduct, and lay a foundation for settled peace and satisfaction of mind. But certainly the more difficult the undertaking, the more necessary is it that we should be frequently engaged in it. Every one indeed must judge for himself, as to the *particular times* when this enquiry shall be made. It is certain in general, that the more leisure any can command, the greater obligation are they under, to the *frequent* discharge of this duty. There are few or none, however, who may not find time every evening to review the actions of the day; and there is something in this practice so agreeable to the common sense and reason of mankind, that we find it recommended even by some *beatben* writers.* But besides this

* Such was the advice given by *Pythagoras* to his scholars in those celebrated lines in his *Golden Verses*.

Μηδ' ὕπνον μαλακοῖσιν ἐπ' ὀμμασι προσδεξασθαι
 Πρὶν τῶν ἡμερῶν ἔργων τρεῖς ἡμέρας ἐπελθεῖν
 Πῇ παρεῖν· τί δ' ἐρεξά· τί μοι δεόν ἐκ ἐτελεσθῇ.
 Ταῦτα σε τῆς θειῆς ἀρετῆς εἰς ἰχθὺα θήσει.

Thus englished by Dr. *Watts*, in his *Improvement of the Mind*.

Nor let soft slumbers close your eyes,
 Before you've recollected thrice
 The train of actions through the day,
 Where have my feet chose out their way?
 What have I learnt where-e'er I've been,
 From all I've heard, from all I've seen?
 What know I more that's worth the knowing?
 What have I done, that's worth the doing?
 What have I sought that I should shun?
 What duty have I left undone,
 Or into what new follies run?
 These self-enquiries are the road,
 To lead to virtue and to God.

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daily

daily Examination of ourselves, it will be advisable at certain seasons, to take a more *solemn* and *deliberate* survey of our *habitual* temper and conduct, which will enable us to judge with more truth and certainty, not only concerning our state and character in *general*, but even some *particular actions*, which, when seen in this more *distant* view, will often appear to us very different from what they did in our *first* reflections upon them. And it may be of use to commit to *writing* the remarks we make on such occasions, by reviewing which at different times we may the more easily know what progress we are making in religion. But all such rules, which refer to the *particular manner* of conducting this enquiry, must be left to every one's discretion. That which is useful to one, may not be so to another: and he who is sincerely desirous to attain the *end*, will not be greatly mistaken as to the *means*.

IMPROVEMENT.

1. We see what is the great end we should propose to ourselves by this self-enquiry; namely, our establishment in religion.

When we set ourselves to examine our own hearts, it should be (as we have already observed) with a sincere intention to rectify those disorders we perceive in them, and to make farther improvements in a virtuous and religious temper. And though we should not be able, after the most accurate enquiry, absolutely to determine our character, we are not there-
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fore to conclude, that our labour is lost, or that the Examination is fruitless: if it has helped us to discover any blemishes which before lay concealed, if it has rendered us more watchful and circumspect, if it has stirred us up to greater diligence and activity in our Christian course, it has answered the best purposes. Even this remaining uncertainty as to our state, however painful, may be of great use to quicken us in our duty, and to preserve us from that confidence in our security, which might lay us open to the assaults of temptation. Nevertheless it is certainly our duty, as well as our interest, to seek after more entire satisfaction. And the greater progress we have made in religion, the more likely we are to attain it. Indeed, (as we have hinted above) it is hardly to be expected that those very low and imperfect degrees of goodness, which the generality of Christians take up with, can lay a sufficient foundation for any settled hope or confidence: those many spots and blemishes which are to be found in their character, and their frequent failings and miscarriages must unavoidably create continual doubts and suspicions. If therefore we wish to arrive at a more fixed persuasion of our interest in the divine favour, and the blessings of the gospel, (and who that knows their value, would not earnestly wish it!) we must aim at much more advanced degrees of piety and virtue; we must be *steadfast and immoveable* in the practice of our duty, guarding with the utmost solicitude against temptation, and abounding in every good word and work. In

a word, *forgetting what is behind*, overlooking all past attainments, let us *press towards the mark, for the prize of the high calling in Christ Jesus*. Phil. iii. 14.

2. We learn from hence, the great importance of Self-examination to the Christian life; and how little those consult their religious interest who allow themselves in the habitual neglect of it.

It is the very foundation of all religion; and one might venture to pronounce that man destitute of any true sense of it, who never looked into his own heart, or made any serious reflections on his own character. It is this self-enquiry that must lead us into an acquaintance with our own wants, our weaknesses and defects, our sins and follies, and the temptations to which we are particularly exposed: If we are insensible of these, we can never apply in earnest for pardon or assistance, nor shall we be disposed to use the necessary means for securing our religious interests.

While we continue strangers to ourselves, (and strangers we must be, if Self-examination be wholly neglected) all the instructions we receive, and all the advantages we enjoy for our spiritual improvement will be utterly vain and ineffectual. Till a person enters deeply into his own breast, and applies divine truths to his own case, the motives of religion can make no impression upon him. He may indeed have acquired a speculative knowledge of these subjects, and may perhaps be able to discourse upon them with freedom and propriety; but he will

will consider them only as the employment of his understanding, and will never enter into their spirit, or act under their influence. How unaccountable is it then, that those who profess to be concerned about their religious welfare, should live in the neglect of so plain, and so essential a duty ! And how much is it to be lamented, that even serious Christians are not more diligent and conscientious in the practice of it. Little do they consider how much true peace and self-enjoyment they lose. No wonder if they complain of the low state of religion in their souls, and are full of doubts and fears, while they are so remiss in using that which would prove the most effectual means of establishing their minds, and confirming their hopes. —Let us be deeply humbled before God for our own negligence and indifference, and let it be our sincere resolution to apply ourselves with greater seriousness and constancy to this acknowledged, but neglected duty. It is true, it will require some degree of resolution to overcome that indisposition and reluctance which the mind perceives to this employment : but surely the advantage attending it will be a sufficient recompence, and even that difficulty we now complain of, will vanish by degrees ; and in proportion as our religious character improves, it will give us *pleasure* to examine ourselves. Every new conquest over our lusts will yield us the most solid satisfaction, and the seeds of virtue sown in the mind and springing up in the fruits of holiness, will afford us the most delightful prospect.

3. If serious reflection and Self-examination be of so much importance, what reason have we to admire the wisdom and goodness of God in appointing stated seasons for these exercises.

The mind even of the most sober and thoughtful is apt to be dissipated by the cares or pleasures of life, and would soon contract a disrelish and unsuitness for an employment that is attended with so much difficulty and self-denial. God has therefore in great condescension to our weakness, directed a certain proportion of our time to be more immediately devoted to the cultivation of religion and virtue in our souls. On such seasons we are called to separate ourselves from the business and amusements of life, that with greater advantage we may *seek and intermeddle with true wisdom*, that we may command more leisure to converse with God and our own hearts. To assist our reflections, he has instituted the divine ordinances of his sanctuary, in which the most interesting truths are set before us, to awaken our attention and impress our minds.—This indeed is the proper light in which all the instructions and admonitions we receive from the word of God should be considered. They are intended, not to *supersede*, but only to *direct* and *improve* our more *private* meditations. Unless therefore we *apply* the sacred truths we hear to *ourselves*, unless we compare our own temper and character with the rules which the gospel lays down, unless we *recollect* them afterwards in our retirements, and endeavour by serious consideration so to fix them upon the

the mind, that they may have their proper effect on our future conduct ; unless we make this use of them, the very end and design for which they are delivered to us is lost.— And the same remark may be applied to the reading of the Scriptures, or other books of a practical and devotional kind. Their proper use is to supply us with *subjects for our own reflection* and not to *stand in its stead*. For indeed this exercise is so absolutely necessary to purify, enlighten, and establish the mind, that no other means of religion, however valuable in themselves, can possibly supply the want of it.—Let it be a rule with us then to employ some part of our *sacred* time, and particularly the *evening of the Lord's-day*, in the careful performance of this duty: and I persuade myself, we shall soon perceive the advantage of it in our visible improvement in religion, and in a growing acquaintance with our own hearts.

4. Let us be thankful for the clear discoveries of our duty with which we are favoured.

God has written his laws in our hearts, and his statutes in our inward parts: for reason is the *candle of the Lord*, (Prov. xx. 27.) and the *inspiration of the Almighty* hath given us understanding, Job xxxii. 8. Every man hath a faithful monitor within his own breast, which, while it remains unperverted, points out his duty, and powerfully urges him to the practice of it. And though in some intricate cases it may be difficult to determine where our duty lies ; yet in general the path is plain and easy

easy to be found.—But thanks be to God, we are not left merely to the light of nature for our direction, but are favoured with a divine revelation, in which we are *taught what is good, and what the Lord our God requires of us.* The Son of God has condescended to become our instructor. He has taught both by precept and example, and enforced his commands by the most powerful sanctions. The best and only return we can make for these favours, is faithfully to consult the dictates of conscience and to study the sacred oracles; that we may more fully comprehend the perfection and extent of the divine law, and may be enabled with greater advantage to search and try ourselves.

5. Let us all be persuaded to comply with the exhortation in the text.—So may we *ponder the path of our feet, that all our ways may be established!*

For this purpose, give me leave to conclude with urging this precept on each of our consciences; that, by the blessing of God, those who have been hitherto careless and thoughtless may be awakened to serious reflection, and before it is too late, may attend to those things that concern their everlasting peace.

Consider then, is not *reason* the distinguishing excellence of our natures? and can we imagine we are not accountable to our Maker for the improvement of it? Will any flatter themselves that he is *above* regarding the actions of men, and that the most High takes no account of our behaviour? But can it be thought unworthy

worthy of him to *superintend* and *govern* those creatures whom he has thought fit to *bring into being*, and to endue with powers and faculties by which they are made *capable* of moral government? Now what can we imagine was the design of reason, if not to direct our conduct according to the laws which the supreme ruler and governor of the world has laid down, and which are evidently intended to advance our highest happiness? But is it possible this design should be answered, if we scarce ever employ one serious thought upon the subject? Are we likely to fulfil the end of our creation, and keep the path of wisdom, if we walk at random, just as inclination and passion lead the way? Some perhaps may affect to make light of such remonstrances, and justify themselves by the example of others about them. But let such consider, how they will answer it at the great tribunal of their judge, when the secrets of all hearts shall be disclosed. Nay, let them consider, how they can *now* answer it at the tribunal of *their own conscience*. Enter into your own breasts; think seriously on your conduct, and then say whether it approves itself to your own mind. Does not your heart smite you for your levity and folly? And beware lest you think lightly of its reproofs; for the sentence it pronounces will be confirmed by that almighty being, on whose will your eternal state depends.

But you'll say perhaps, "You *cannot* consider. " You have not leisure or abilities for so difficult " a work." But do you not exercise reflection and

and consideration in the affairs of *the world*? And why not then in the concerns of *religion*? Men in business discover great prudence and wisdom in the management of their trade; they are diligent and exact in keeping their accounts, and are not satisfied unless they can form a pretty certain judgment of the state of their affairs. Now what should prevent your employing the same diligence and circumspection in your spiritual interests?

Some again have neglected this important work *so long*, till they are *afraid* to look into their own hearts. They know conscience will reproach them, and therefore they would willingly fly from its accusations.—But can you then, unhappy men, flee from *yourselves*? Do you not carry the fatal sting in your own bosoms? Or supposing you could still the voice of conscience; suppose you could conceal your selves from its remonstrances, think ye that you can possibly escape the judgment of God? If your own hearts condemn you, be assured that God, who is *greater than your heart*, will not acquit you. Be prevailed upon then to sit in judgment on your own actions, and let conscience pass its verdict. *Judge your selves, that ye be not condemned with the world.*

Finally, let those who have already begun this work be persuaded to abound in it more and more. Let it be their concern to encrease in the knowledge of themselves, and to make those attainments in holiness, which may render it a pleasing and delightful employment to converse with their own hearts.

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